

An Elusive Consensus: Traits and Competencies of Movement Catalysts

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, July 2023

Abstract

Mission literature that addresses the key characteristics of movement catalysts is for the most part based on personal observations and reflections. A recent study by Bethany Research Institute included an extensive literature review that found there is no consensus among trusted thinkers regarding what effective movement catalysts' most important traits actually are. Such a confusing range of understanding is not a minor issue, since effective leadership is vital to the emergence of all movements. To help clear the way toward arriving at a shared understanding of effective catalysts' qualities, this article seeks to understand the reasons why leading mission thinkers have widely divergent views.

Key Words: catalysts, competencies, movements, pioneers, traits

Introduction

We know what an effective movement catalyst looks like, don't we? We should! We need to know the qualities, traits, and competencies that characterize effective pioneers who take the kingdom where it is not yet realized. At least, we should have an intuitive understanding of the qualities of these important people who advance the kingdom of God. The fact is: We don't! A systematic look at the evangelical literature that has been published on movement catalysts reveals this lack of clarity. This confused situation constitutes a significant problem, because only when we understand the profile of pioneers can we effectively mentor, equip, develop, and place them.

With the need for consensus about catalyst characteristics in mind, this article explores the missiological implications of findings from a wide-ranging review of evangelical literature conducted by some of us associated with Bethany Research Institute (BRI). That review was to lay the foundation for an extensive empirical research project to discover the core personal traits and ministry competencies of mission pioneers who have effectively catalyzed a movement to Christ (CPM, DMM, T4T, etc.). The literature review went much further than a mere academic formality, cataloguing what had already been written on the topic. Instead, the review created an opportunity to compare and contrast what leading voices in the field are saying about movement catalysts (Bloomberg & Volpe 2008), as well as to generate a new understanding of the subject.

Lack of Agreement in the Literature

It is important to recognize first that the literature on movement catalysts is not well developed. The few publications that address this subject sum up the intuitive understanding of key movement thinkers. Unfortunately, these intuitions have serious limitations, as they derive either from the cumulative experience of a single seasoned individual or from analysis of a limited number of case studies. Carefully reviewing the literature gives detail and substance to the nature of this lack of consensus about movement catalyst characteristics.

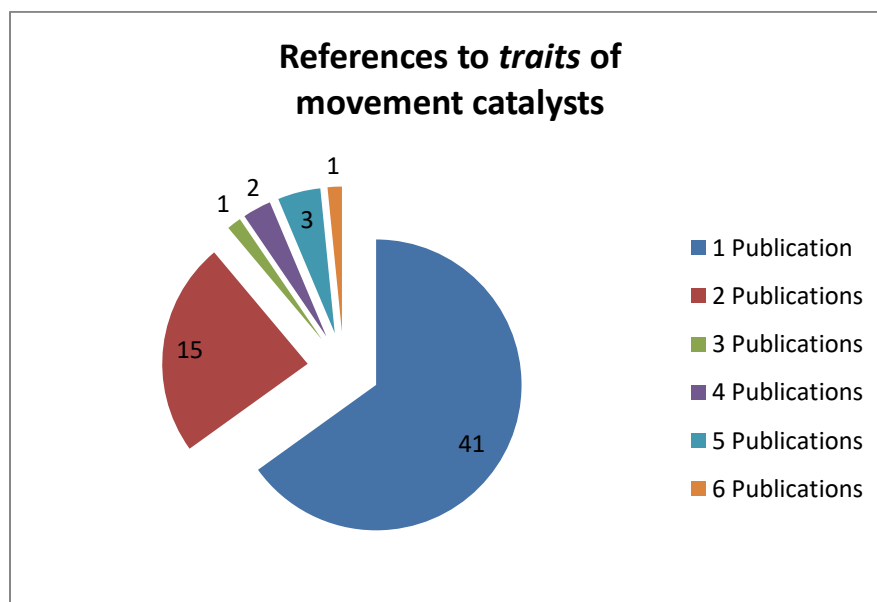
According to our survey, the most relevant literature consists of 14 monographs (books, articles, and research papers) that address in some way the traits and competencies of movement catalysts. The authors use various terms for those whom this study labels as "movement

catalysts”—“pioneer,” “apostolic agent,” “movement leader,” and “catalyst,” to name a few. We identified a total of 64 different traits and 46 competencies listed in the various publications. One of the first discoveries that stands out from these two long lists is that there is very little overlap between the traits and competencies put forward by the different authors. This lack of consistency has probably handicapped both thinking and practice in the movement world. However, before we explore the implications of what we found in the literature, we should first examine the specific findings on traits and competencies in the relevant literature.

Traits of Movement Catalysts

For our purposes, the “traits” of a movement catalyst consist of their personal characteristics which contribute to consistent leadership effectiveness. Trait researcher Stephen Zaccaro puts it this way: the traits of a leader are simply the “qualities that differentiate leaders from non-leaders” (2007, p. 12). To apply this definition more specifically to our context, “traits” are the qualities that differentiate effective catalysts from other pioneer missionaries.

The sizeable majority (41) of 64 traits identified with movement catalysts were referenced in only a single publication. Only half (23) of the total number were mentioned by more than one author. As Graph 1 below illustrates, even the 23 traits mentioned by more than one author do not represent anything like a consensus (see Appendix A for further details).



Graph 1

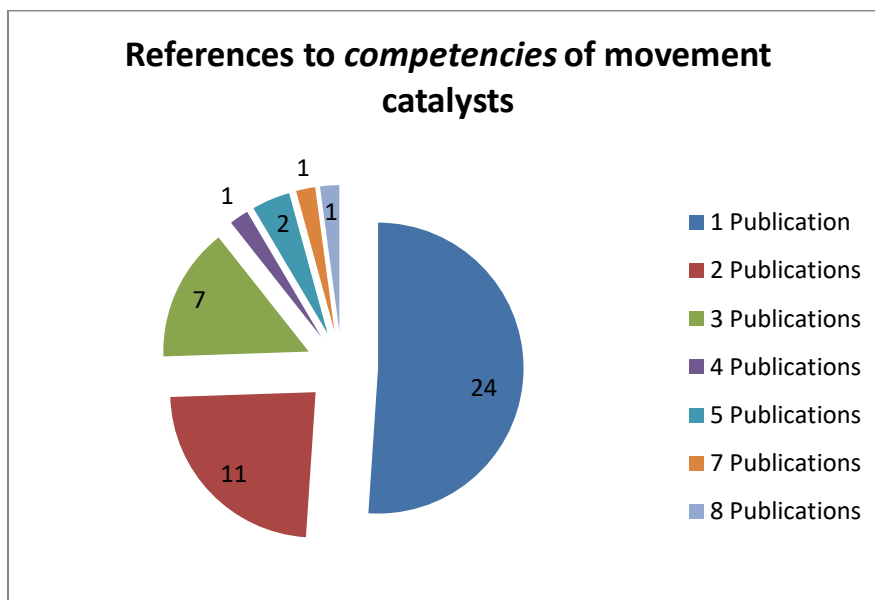
The graph above makes it abundantly clear that the vast majority (89%) of these traits were mentioned by only one or two authors. That fact also means that only 11 percent were mentioned in more than two publications. Furthermore, even the single most commonly identified trait, “perpetual learner,” was mentioned in only six of the 14 publications. We see a similar phenomenon in the literature regarding ministry competencies.

Competencies of Movement Catalysts

When applied to movement catalysts, a “competency” represents an area of knowledge or skill critical for the catalyzing of a movement, always related to an activity or outcome. Competencies

should be distinguished from traits in that they are “what leaders can accomplish” as opposed to traits which identify “who leaders are” (Katz 1955, p. 34).

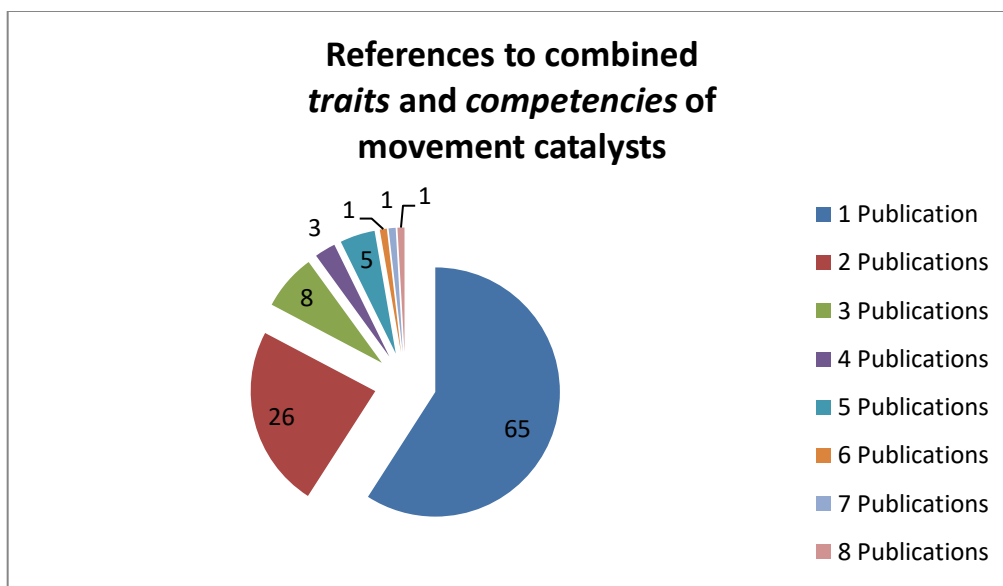
As we turn to considering the competencies of catalysts, we found only a little more agreement across the publications than with traits. We identified a total of 47 competencies that were listed, but less than half (23) appeared in more than one publication, as shown in Graph 2 below (see Appendix B for more details).



Graph 2

Again, this diverse labeling of competencies illustrates the lack of consensus about what a movement catalyst’s competency profile should actually be. Of the 47 total competencies identified, a significant majority (35) were mentioned by only one or two authors. Only one competency—that of “delegation/equipping”—came anywhere close to what we could call a consensus, appearing in only a slight majority (eight) of the 14 publications.

If we combine traits and competencies together, we end up with a total of 110 separate items listed in the literature, represented below in Graph 3.



Graph 3

In this third and last graph we can see that the vast majority (83%) of the traits and competencies of movement catalysts discussed in the literature appeared in only one or two publications. It is thus safe to say that our wide examination of the relevant mission literature uncovered a significant lack of consensus as to what an effective catalyst looks like. This wide range of viewpoints is not a minor detail, since effective leadership is vital to the emergence of all movements.

We believe that is important to understand the reasons why leading mission thinkers have such different views about effective movement catalysts. We propose four possible interpretations of this lack of consensus, all with implications that need serious consideration.

Lack of Consensus as a Problem

One way to think about the lack of consensus described above is to view it as a problem. People may find it disconcerting when those who are considered experts do not agree on an important topic. After all, when competent people study the same phenomena, they will come to basically the same conclusion or at least similar conclusions, right? Unfortunately, viewing the lack of consensus as a problem may constitute a problem in and of itself, because such a view—particularly with respect to understanding movement catalysts—oversimplifies a very complex subject.

Effectively catalyzing a Christ-ward movement involves multifaceted human-to-human interactions, as well as the somewhat mysterious domain of divine-human interaction. Intellectually, we accept the idea that launching a movement is a complex process, yet subconsciously we wish it were easier to understand. Perhaps the lack of consensus in the literature expresses this very complexity. The multifaceted nature of how movements begin can serve as a helpful reminder that the hard work of thinking about complex realities better equips us to wrestle with the challenges of catalyzing movements. Furthermore, being aware of this complexity helps us see other, more productive ways of thinking about the issue of describing effective movement catalyzers.

Lack of Common Nomenclature

Another factor that may partly contribute to the lack of consensus in the literature is the use of different terms for conceptually similar traits and competencies. For example, the literature review identified each of the following traits separately:

- Strong personality (Miley 2003)
- Boldness (Prinz 2016; Larsen 2020)
- Aggressiveness (Larsen 2020)
- Over-assertiveness (Sinclair 2005)
- Tenacity/not back down (Miley 2003)
- Action-focused (Smith 2014)

Although this set does not represent formal linguistic equivalents, the terms' semantic ranges certainly overlap significantly due to conceptual similarities. Similar semantic range clusters can be seen among others of the 64 traits identified in the literature. Likewise, the list of competencies contains several of these clusters. Two examples will suffice:

- Gains a following (Miley 2003)
- Influence (Miley 2003)
- Leadership (Sinclair 2015)

and

- Vision casting (Sinclair 2015)
- Inspiring vision (Prinz & Goldhor 2022a)

These clustered lists demonstrate that one of the reasons for a lack of consensus is the way individual authors and researchers use terms, along with the differing nuances of meaning they intend by those word choices. At the same time, we need to emphasize that, even if all publications were synthesized and their nomenclature standardized, a clear consensus as such would not be achieved.

While this difficulty in reaching a consensus may seem somewhat obvious, one important implication may not be. As the study of movements is becoming a sub-discipline within missiology, those who research them will need to start using the same terminology. Perfect unanimity seems unlikely, but a move toward common nomenclature would represent a big step forward in the development of the sub-discipline. When researchers and practitioners do not share the same vocabulary, they often talk past each other. As those who speak and write about movements and those who catalyze them, we recognize both the importance of nuance of meaning and the need for some degree of commonality in order to enable clear communication.

This importance of balancing the needs for nuanced meaning and clear communication demonstrates another way the work of Bethany Research Institute (Prinz & Goldhor 2022b) can contribute to our understanding of movements. Great effort was taken to harmonize the terms found in the literature so they could be used in the study of movement catalysts. As such, these distilled terms could provide a helpful step toward a shared nomenclature, used by both field missionaries and missiologists alike when talking and writing about movement catalysts.

Lack of Dialog among Movement Thinkers

When studying the publications on movement catalysts, we found that one author referencing another was an exception rather than the rule. Sinclair (2005), Dent (2012), and Smith (2014) were notable exceptions, but even then Sinclair and Smith quote only one other author. The vast majority of authors writing about movement catalysts never refer to any other publications. Where is the academic discourse, one must wonder? Where are we seeing the iron sharpening iron among reflective practitioners?

Unfortunately, it appears that many if not most authors research, reflect, and record in silos with a complete lack of healthy, robust dialog among researchers and movement thought leaders. Although solitary research might be common in the early stages of a budding field of thought, it must not continue. We propose that a new academic field of movement leadership, under the discipline of missiology, should emerge to facilitate such dialog. The fields of organizational leadership, pastoral leadership, and missional leadership exist; why not movement leadership? The time for the inception of this field has come.

Lack of actual clarity

The final way we can understand the lack of consensus about movement catalysts' traits and competencies is to see it as a call for intentional effort to gain greater clarity. As we have already noted, the lack of consensus among thought leaders is partly a reflection of the complexity of the subject at hand. The Christ-ward movements happening around the world today are undoubtedly complex social, spiritual, and religious phenomena. No two are exactly alike, nor are those who lead them, as reflected in the literature review results. We can appreciate the variety of the work that has already been published, while at the same time recognizing its limitations. Clearly new research, fresh writing, and more dialog is needed on what type of catalysts God uses to start movements.

This need explains why Bethany Research Institute has poured hundreds of work hours into the study of movement catalysts. We hope that many others will invest the time to tap into the resulting wealth of information by reading, reflecting on, and applying our findings—as well as contribute their own research findings to the overall discussion.

Conclusion: A Call to Dig Deeper

We live in an exciting time in the history of world mission. God is moving in incredible ways among the unreached, and various kinds of Christ-ward movements make up a large part of that picture. However, within a new and developing field of study, the literature about these movements shows a lack of clarity. In particular, our review of the literature revealed a striking lack of consensus among thought leaders as to how to describe the essential qualities, or traits and competencies, of the pioneer mission leaders this article has called “movement catalysts.”

As noted above, there are several different interpretive lenses through which to understand the lack of consensus about what makes up a movement catalyst. First, we can regard the lack of consensus as a problem. However, this perspective oversimplifies the multifarious and mysterious phenomena we call movements, the complexity of which should openly be acknowledged. Alternatively, the confusion can be attributed to a lack of common nomenclature for movement catalysts' traits and competencies. A third way to understand the lack of consensus is to attribute it to a lack of dialog among thought leaders. Finally, the need for consensus can serve as a call for

the mission community to spend more time researching and reflecting on the very important, complex topic of movements and the pioneers who catalyze them, with the goal of greater clarity. We hope this article will stimulate more study and dialog, and we invite movement researchers and thought leaders to engage with this study and others like it. We believe that such missiological reflection will help equip a new generation of movement catalysts and could help lead to a major advance in world mission.

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Appendix A: Comparison of Traits of Apostolic Leaders Showing Distribution across Publications

Traits	Publications by Author and Date												
	Miley 2003	Sinclair 2005	Stevens 2008	Chard & Chard 2008	Nelson 2009	Hirsch & Catchim 2012 + Hirsch 2017	Dent 2012	Watson 2011 + Watson & Watson 2014	Travis & Travis 2014	Smith 2014	Addison 2015	Prinz 2016	Larsen 2016 + 2020
Big picture thinking	x					x							
Strong personality	x												
Self-awareness	x												
Desire to initiate	x					x						X	
Independent	x	x											
Nonconformist	x												
Thrive on challenge	x	x											
Critical	x												
Impatience	x												
Tendency to overextend	x	x											
Hunger for depth with God	x	x			x					x		x	

Traits	Publications by Author and Date												
	Miley 2003	Sinclair 2005	Stevens 2008	Chard & Chard 2008	Nelson 2009	Hirsch & Catchim 2012 + Hirsch 2017	Dent 2012	Watson 2011 + Watson & Watson 2014	Travis & Travis 2014	Smith 2014	Addison 2015	Prinz 2016	Larsen 2016 + 2020
Broad in their horizons	x	x											
Tenacity/not backing down	x	x						x		x			x
Want good handle on things		x											
Quirky/hard to get along		x											
Self-confidence		x										x	
Over-assertiveness		x											
Evangelistic heart				x					x	x		x	
Vision				x				x		x		x	x
Praiseworthy character/ Integrity				x			x	x		x			
Obedience to God								x					
Humility								x					
Determination to succeed								x					
Willingness to risk								x					
Ability to forgive								x					
Courage to change								x					
Passion				x									
Servanthood				x									
Love of people				x								x	
Availability				x									
Perpetual learner					x			x	x	x	x	x	
Reflective					x								
Sacrifice							x						
Focus							x				x		

Traits	Publications by Author and Date												
	Miley 2003	Sinclair 2005	Stevens 2008	Chard & Chard 2008	Nelson 2009	Hirsch & Catchim 2012 + Hirsch 2017	Dent 2012	Watson 2011 + Watson & Watson 2014	Travis & Travis 2014	Smith 2014	Addison 2015	Prinz 2016	Larsen 2016 + 2020
Passionate urgency										x		x	
Single-mindedness									x	x			
Love for God										x			
Led by God										x			
Action-focus										x			
Results-orientation										x			
Perseverance									x	x		x	
Been with and called by Jesus											x		
Intentional spiritual growth			x										
Being a model			x										x
Strong work ethic			x					x					
Holy discontent			x										
Bible-driven			x									x	
Listening for God's voice			x										
Live the Gospel											x		
Not fenced in											x		
Boldness												x	x
Emotional Stability												x	
Dependability												x	
Adaptability												x	
Drive for Responsibility												x	
Drive to Achieve												x	
Desire to Excel												x	
Intelligence						x						x	

Traits	Publications by Author and Date												
	Miley 2003	Sinclair 2005	Stevens 2008	Chard & Chard 2008	Nelson 2009	Hirsch & Catchim 2012 + Hirsch 2017	Dent 2012	Watson 2011 + Watson & Watson 2014	Travis & Travis 2014	Smith 2014	Addison 2015	Prinz 2016	Larsen 2016 + 2020
Confidence in the Spirit												x	
Confidence in Locals												x	
Inspiring Personality												x	
Sociability												x	
Aggressiveness													x
Entrepreneurial						x							

Appendix B: List of Competencies from the Literature Showing Distribution across Publications

Competencies	Publications by Author and Date													
	Miley 2003	Sinclair 2005	Stevens 2008	Chard & Chard 2008	Allen 2009	Nelson 2009	Hirsch & Catchim 2012 + Hirsch 2017	Dent 2012	Watson 2011 + Watson & Watson 2014	Travis & Travis 2014	Smith 2014	Addison 2015	Prinz 2016	Larsen 2016 + 2020
Gift of faith	x	x		x				x			x	x	x	
Influence	x												x	
Gain following	x	x							x					
Initiate		x												
Make things happen		x												
Vision casting		x	x								x		x	
Bible teaching		x					x							
Leadership		x									x			
Prayerfulness/ Intercession				x		x				x	x		x	
Experience in ministry				x										

Competencies	Publications by Author and Date													
	Miley 2003	Sinclair 2005	Stevens 2008	Chard & Chard 2008	Allen 2009	Nelson 2009	Hirsch & Catchim 2012 + Hirsch 2017	Dent 2012	Watson 2011 + Watson & Watson 2014	Travis & Travis 2014	Smith 2014	Addison 2015	Prinz 2016	Larsen 2016 + 2020
Delegation/ equipping			X	X	X			X	X	X	X			X
Recognize and catalyze gifts			X	X	X			X	X					
Evaluation of progress						X				X				
Leader development								X		X				X
Team building								X						X
Listening skills								X						
Knowledge of movements								X		X		X		
Strategize and implement plans								X						
Ethnographic learning									X					
Cross-cultural befriending			X						X					X
Miraculous gifts						X			X	X				X
Gift of evangelism									X		X			X
Advocacy									X					
Discipling							X			X	X	X		
Mentoring										X				X
Exercise accountability										X				
Cognitive ability										X				
Training			X								X			
Resource brokering			X											
Identify partners			X									X		
Connect with people											X			

Competencies	Publications by Author and Date													
	Miley 2003	Sinclair 2005	Stevens 2008	Chard & Chard 2008	Allen 2009	Nelson 2009	Hirsch & Catchim 2012 + Hirsch 2017	Dent 2012	Watson 2011 + Watson & Watson 2014	Travis & Travis 2014	Smith 2014	Addison 2015	Prinz 2016	Larsen 2016 + 2020
Gather communities							X		X			X		X
Ask DBS questions														X
Guide multiplying groups														X
Wholistic community development														X
Inner healing prayer														X
Group coaching														X
Assess health of groups and clusters														X
Multiplication of movements														X
Complex Thinking													X	
Innovation							X						X	
Influencing of Beliefs													X	
Inspiring Vision							X						X	
Challenging Assumptions													X	
Personal Consideration													X	
Empowering													X	